

The Westering of Walt Whitman

by Martha Scott Trimble

The literary westering of *Leaves of Grass* established Walt Whitman as the first poet of the American West, the term westering with reference to Whitman meaning a mental turning westward, a conviction in the geographical and developmental advance from the "eastern sea" to the "western sea," the broadest possible delineation of the American West allowable even today. Whatever the tracery of multi-layered imbrication of Paumanok, the sea, sex, the soul, the South, the Secession War, the Individual, Oneself, Freedom, Love, Democracy, Life, and Death in *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman saw in the Union the result of the trek westward. For one who has read *Leaves of Grass* for fifty years, as I have, the admission of John Burroughs in his 1896 *Whitman/A Study* that "the book is all things to all men" opens the way to indulge in this westering thesis. First starting Whitman well before junior high school—that first copy now a dog-eared, lined and underlined 1921 Modern Library edition with the introduction by Carl Sandburg—and reading *Leaves of Grass* perched on rock high above the Cache La Poudre River, South Platte tributary in northcentral Colorado, I have long believed that Whitman saw not just a geographical, developmental but an ideological West, the American West as microcosmic exemplification of his larger, macrocosmic view of a world-westering—and beyond, including the potential for influence on not only the world but the world of letters. *Leaves of Grass*, by its epic nature lauding the You and the Me, is the westering of Walt Whitman, a challenge and charge to the American West today.

"'Vastness' is a word that applies to him," writes Burroughs. The "vastness" Burroughs uses to identify the whole nature of Whitman aptly encompasses in a more literal sense not only the concrete descriptive recording of the natural landscape of the West but the settlements and occupations of ever-westward-moving humanity and the individual western characters whose personae Whitman assumes. *Leaves of Grass* manifests a descriptive record of the land—the wide prairies and sustaining rivers, in particular, to encompass a wide West:

In "Starting from Paumanok," Whitman, singing the chants of the rivers and the states (p. 17), is "Aware of the fresh free giver the flowing Missouri . . . / . . . the buffalo herds . . . the flight of the mountain hawk" (pp. 15-16; 1856/1860). In "Others May Praise What They Like" (p. 393; 1865), he praises the Missouri and the "prairie-scent." The prairie sights and scents remain with him all his life. Nearing the end (1888) as he is forestalling death, he uses as symbolism the colors of the western sky over the vault of heaven in "A Prairie Sunset" (pp. 530-531) 1888/9). The river imagery remains to the end: "the north-west Columbia, and . . . south-west Colorado" ("Starting from Paumanok," p. 24; 1856/1860/1881); "down Colorado's cañons from the sources of perpetual snow,/Some half-hid in Oregon, or away southward in Texas" ("Autumn Rivulets," p. 357; 1876/1881). As in "From Paumanok Starting I Fly Like a Bird" (p. 284; 1865/1867) he evokes more western images than northern or southern; he always rounds out his Union by returning to the West, circling "again to California" ("Song of the Banner at Daybreak," p. 287; 1865/1881).

One must not be lulled, however, into the belief that Whitman's only concern with the West lies in its natural beauties, its rivers, vast prairies, or plateaus, for at the heart of *Leaves of Grass*, of course, in all editions, the people—En Masse—stand paramount: "the immigrants continually coming and landing" ("Starting from Paumanok," p. 27; 1856/1860/1881) ". . . cover the wharf or levee" ("Song of Myself," p. 42; 1855/1881) "These shows of the East and West are tame compared to you/ . . . you are immense and interminable as These furies, elements, storms, motions of Nature; . . . you are he or she who is master or mistress over them/ . . . in your own right over Nature," ("To You" in "Birds of Passage," p. 235; 1860/1881) Here are westerners in their settlements, in their occupations: "in the healthy house of adobie"[sic] ("SFP," p. 24), "In arriere, wigwam, hunter's hut . . . the backwoods village. . ." (p. 27), "in the settlements" along the rivers ("Song of the Broad-Axe," p. 185; 1856/1881), "in cabins among the Californian [sic] mountains . . . or on the Columbia . . . or down by the Yellowstone" (p. 193), in "the forts on the shores of harbors" ("SBD" p. 288; 1865/1881). Here are the people, in all the frontier imagery, "House-building . . . / Blacksmithing . . . / Stone-cutting," ("A Song for Occupations," p. 216; 1855/1881), harvesting "the immense area of grain," ("SED" p. 287; 1865/1881) with "The human divine inventions . . . / . . . reaping machines . . . ,threshers of grain" ("Return of the Heroes" in "Autumn Rivulets," p. 363; 1867/1881). The engineer in joy with his locomotive ("A Song for Joys," p. 177; 1869/1888) controls the "Fierce-throated beauty . . . /

. . . Launched o'er the prairies wide." ("To a Locomotive in Winter" in "From Noon to Starry Night." p. 472; 1876/1881) The ox-tamer "will take the wildest steer in the world and break him and tame him." ("The Ox-Tamer." p. 397; 1874/1881). Going west is ". . . the common stock . . . incarnating the land," making all "embouchure in him," all between East and West ("By Blue Ontario's Shores." p. 344; 1856/1881). "Song of Occupations," yes, but more explicitly the entire poem "Song of the Broad-Axe" exalts frontier labor and yield in the westward trek, Stanza 9, in particular, with its catalog of frontier tools and creations (pp. 192-3; 1856/1881).

Whitman, for whom "nothing endures but personal qualities," embodies each person; the literary finesse of natural expression and detailed imagery ensnaring the reader indubitably covers the vicariousness. With the Whitman strategy being always to address the reader—YOU have met ME as I am in all my personae, he becomes a westerner. He hunts "Alone far in the wilds . . . / Kindling a fire and broiling . . . fresh-kill'd game" ("SoM" p. 37). He is "a miner in California ("SfP" p. 15); in Dakota's woods, his "diet meat," he "drink[s] from the spring" (p. 17). As countless others before and after him, he walks by himself to "stand and look at the stars, which," he acknowledges, "I think now I never realized before . . . / Now while the great thoughts of space and eternity fill me I will measure myself by them." ("Night on the Prairies." p. 452; 1860/1871). In "Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun," he entreats for "nights perfectly quiet . . . on high plateaus west of the Mississippi . . . and I looking up at the stars" (p. 312; 1865/1881). He crosses the Nevadas, the plateaus; ascends the "towering rocks along the Pacific" ("Rise O Days from Your Fathomless Deeps" in "Drum Taps." p. 291; 1865/1867); bathes "on the beach of the Western Sea" ("Song at Sunset." p. 496; 1860/1881). It is Walt Whitman in the vanguard, beseeching the pioneers to "Follow well in order," the "Western youths/ . . . full of manly pride and friendship/ . . . tramping with the foremost" ("Pioneers! O Pioneers!" p. 229; 1865/1881).

The ease with which he creates the imagery may lead one to overlook the fact that not until 1879 did he travel to the Rocky Mountain West and then only to Denver, Colorado,⁴ though in 1848 he had first seen the Mississippi and Missouri rivers and the vast prairies they divide, the scenes burned into his brain. He did *not* bathe in the Pacific, mine for silver or gold, live on meat in Dakota's woods or, for that matter, even see Dakota; he did not thread down the Colorado or the Columbia rivers though *Leaves of Grass* does indeed make it so. In 1848 the Union comprised thirty states; in 1860, thirty-three; and in 1889, thirty-eight; yet one hundred and twenty years ago he envisioned

fifty states! Today's West is Whitman's West. To indulge here in why he did *not* go west entices; perhaps, though, the not going looms larger than the having gone, considering the vividness with which vicariousness vitalizes his lines.

That in roughly one fifth of the four hundred or five hundred poems of *Leaves of Grass*, including those dropped from earlier editions, the Chanter of Personality, the Poet of Democracy, evokes the frontier, western sights, images, and individuals, and the qualities or characteristics identifiable primarily with the American West, that in line after line he creates the West with the ease of familiarity reflect his West as the *sine qua non* of Union. The "measureless West" ("A Twilight Song," p. 549; 1890)—a phrase he reserved for an 1890 poem—ever awes Whitman: its size, its strength, its spirit.

"The Spirit That Form'd This Scene," subscribed "Written in Platte Cañon, Colorado," summons up a personal rapport with the "savage spirit" embodied in what he actually saw somewhere between Denver and Leadville:

Spirit that form'd this scene.
These tumbled rock-piles grim and red,
These reckless heaven-ambitious peaks,
These gorges, turbulent-clear streams, this naked freshness,
These formless wild arrays, for reasons of their own,
I know thee, savage spirit—we have communed together,
Mine too such wild arrays, for reasons of their own;
Was't charged against my chants they had forgotten art?
To fuse within themselves its rules precise and delicatessé?
The lyrist's measure'd beat, the wrought-out temple's grace
column and polish'd arch forgot?
But thou have revelest here spirit that form'd this scene.
They have remember'd thee.

(p. 486; 1879/1881)

Called by Edwin Fussell "one of his weaker poems and a typical late Western poetic effusion," this poem, written in 1879 but first published in 1881, leads the reader—at least the western reader who has stood awed by such grandeur—to ask to what extent Whitman envisioned *Leaves of Grass* emulating the West in vastness, in wildness, in uniqueness . . . in influence.

The savagery and beauty of native landscape, naturalness, freedom, fraternity, manly pride and friendship, equality—the woman the equal of the man, independence, the open hand and heart, the chance of a new beginning—through *Leaves of Grass* in all its editions—exemplify the West even today, like magnets for natives, retirees, and tourists, including three young Danish sailors arriving on

a tall ship for the Bicentennial celebration, suffering but surviving the devastation of the July 31 flood in the Big Thompson canyon to fulfill a lifelong dream of visiting the American West.

History is not the concern of *Leaves of Grass* except for the Secession War and occasional pieces like the pro-hero, dutiful tribute to Custer ("From Far Dakota's Canons," pp. 483-4; 1876/1881). Yet perhaps in all literature there is no finer portrayal of defeat than the "take . . . of four hundred and twelve young men" at Goliad ("SoM" p. 68; 1855/1881). Prototypes for neither the cowboy nor the Indian are the concern of *Leaves of Grass*. That the Hollywood/TV Indian-cowboy syndromic stereotype is absent from *Leaves of Grass* may for some preclude the significance of Whitman's West. To ignore in Whitman, however, this lack would weaken substantiation for what Whitman does say of the West. One should recall thoughtfully that the cattle industry was becoming "big business" with the long cattle drives and popularization of the cowboy only in the latter years of Whitman's life. Obviously the cowboy was not foremost in Whitman's mind. The Indian, on the other hand, one whose family⁴ had been on this continent for two hundred years could easily relegate to vestiges. To Whitman, the Indian is a line, a name, a vignette. The lines are startlingly few: a "squaw wrapt in her yellow-hemm'd cloth" or "the moccasin print" ("SoM"); the debt owed in names, as in Stanza 16 of "Starting from Paumanok" (p. 26), becomes eulogistic in "Yonnonodio" (p. 524; 1887/188-9). One vignette, a tale from his mother, permits a nameless red squaw to live forever ("The Sleepers," Stanza 6, called "Night-Poem" in 1856, pp. 429-30; 1856/1881). Two other vignettes of the trapper and his bride ("SoM" Stanza 10, p. 37) and the eulogy to Osceola ("Osceola" in "Goody-bye My Fancy" pp. 550-551; 1890/1891-2) are from paintings, the latter a gift from George Catlin. Edgeley Todd, in his 1955 study, "Indian Pictures and Two Whitman Poems," with reprints of the paintings, treats Whitman's bringing the canvas to life. That the Indian does not obtrude in *Leaves of Grass* is both the reader's and Whitman's loss, for he creates an Indian for whom he displays shaded sympathies despite the remoteness of a human being Whitman, unfortunately, unlike even Cooper, did not know at all. Of the treatment of the West as a whole, however, one but wonders how he was able to sense the extent of the terrain and the strange raw beauty of the plains and the Rocky Mountains. "Its atmosphere," says Burroughs of *Leaves of Grass*—the poem as a whole—"is always that of the large, free spaces of vast, unhousted nature."⁵ Where, one must ask, but the American West?

What Whitman means by *West*, however, must often be interpreted by single lines. Beyond the visual to the metaphysical Burroughs, in his *Study*, sees as "cosmic,"¹¹ keeping "in mind the earth as a whole, and its relation to the system,"¹² aware that from Whitman comes "the lift of great emotions; the cosmic, the universal . . . always the large, the virile; always perfect acceptance and triumph"¹³ Henry Nash Smith in *Virgin Land* understands this larger westering in Whitman as intended "to restore man's lost harmony with nature . . . a mysticism difficult for the twentieth century to follow." Smith acknowledges that

. . . one is grateful for the intrepid idealism that so triumphantly enabled Whitman to see in the march of the pioneer army a prelude to peace and the brotherhood of nations.¹⁴

Edwin Fussell in *Frontier: American Literature and the American West* conversely dismisses the prophetic as "orbic decisions" all "nonsense"¹⁵ in the same vein in which he asserts Whitman from "1855 to the end. . . shovels Western material into his poem, and expects it to do his creative work for him."¹⁶ If *Leaves of Grass* "Aims to exhibit a modern, democratic, archetypal man, here in America,"¹⁷ and if that archetype evolved meeting and matching the American West, that very West is then pivotal—seminal—for Whitman's macro-West, the westering in the larger sense comprehending Libertad, freedom, an end to the search. He sees the "circle almost circled" ("Facing West from California's Shores," pp. 110-111; 1860/1867). As seer, he asks

But where is what I started for so long ago?
And why is it yet unfound?

(p. 111, lines 10, 11)

His questions in "A Broadway Pageant" (pp. 242-246; 1860/1881) are rhetorical, Whitman secure in his vision "that the centuries are footing it that way . . ."—westward—"for reasons" (p. 245). He prophesies that young Libertad will find all turning toward him, even eastward for his sake.

This macro-West is intentional, personal, and identifiable. For whatever reason, critics notwithstanding, Whitman intended from the beginning "singing in the [larger] West to strike up for a New World" ("SFP" p. 16). Whitman had a dream a century or two—or three?—before others! The Union of the State—"thous the transcendental Union" being dominant in *Leaves of Grass*—to Whitman was possible only through the great bond between the East and the West for the fusion of Democracy. To him the West in both its

ideal and its idyllic realms was that evermoving line to the western shore—and beyond. If America built herself only by moving westward, building for the world, and if the challenge of that move made the western character, then the future lay there—and beyond.

The prophetic breadth of *Leaves of Grass* is intentional; he sees the West in the larger sense the culmination of the ages: "Through the new garden the West" ("Ages and Ages." p. 107; 1860/1867), "the journey ever continued" ("Thoughts." p. 170; 1860/1881), "All, all toward the mystic ocean tending" ("Autumn Rivulets." p. 357; 1876/1881), "The idea of all, of the Western world one and inseparable" ("FPA I Fly." p. 284; 1865/1867), "Life Immense. . ." ("One's Self I Sing." p. 1; 1867/1871).

The cosmic or mystic ideal Whitman has for the macro-West is also personal; Whitman desires not merely to *be* the poet of the West as Fussell contends¹⁹ but to sing out the direction *for* the West of mankind: "I launch all men and women forward with me into the Unknown" ("SoM" p. 81; 1855/1881). From his "perpetual journey" (p. 83) and "O days of the future I believe in you—I isolate myself for your sake" ("BBOS" p. 346; 1856/1881) to "I feel the globe itself swift-swimming in space" ("To the Sun-Set Breeze." p. 546; 1890/1891), the personal pronoun—no longer the I-am-a-miner-I-follow-the-Mississippi—is Whitman himself, adding another dimension to interpretation of West. He incorporates what he personally sees as the future of America and the western world—and beyond: "I project the history of the future" ("To a Historian." p. 4; 1860/1871); "I watch thee advancing, absorbing the present, transcending the past,/ I see thy light lighting . . . as if the entire globe" ("Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood." p. 458; 1872/1881). He is a part of a larger whole: "That only holds men together which aggregates all in a living principle" ("By Blue Ontario's Shore." p. 347; 1856/1881).

Whitman's macro-West is paramount in "Salut Au Monde," "By Blue Ontario's Shore," and "A Passage to India," among others; more pertinent perhaps here, "Song of the Redwood Tree" (pp. 206-210; 1874/1881), which is considerably more than the first line, "A California Song," implies, may well be the apogee of the personal commitment to the macro-West. In Stanza 3, in particular, alluding to the singularly western images of Stanzas 1 and 2, Whitman sees "the promise of thousands of years . . ./Promis'd to be fulfill'd . . ./The new society at last, proportionate to Nature . . . broad humanity" (p. 210). He salutes the world as "a great round wonder rolling through space" ("Salut Au Monde." p. 139; 1856/1881), "Each of us allow'd

the eternal purports of the earth" (p. 147). He sees "Passage to MORE than India" ("Passage to India." p. 420; 1871/1881); "The lands to be welded together" (p. 412), "And thou America,/For the scheme's culmination . . ." ("Song of the Universal" in "Birds of Passage." p. 228; 1874/1881).

Gradually, imagery which a half to a century ago evoked or provoked responses of incredulity becomes identifiable. Whitman asks America to herself far in the future in "the Northern Pacific to Sitka or Aliaska [sic]" ("Songs of Parting." p. 493; 1865/1881). He sees "A land of perfect physique" and "immense spiritual results future years far West," his "songs well understood there" (p. 494). Early he foresees himself "the bard of the future" ("[Readers to Come]" p. 636; 1860) and, later, "The prophet and the bard,/Shall yet maintain themselves, in higher stages yet" ("Eidolons" in "Inscriptions" p. 7; 1876). *Leaves of Grass* is to "add, fuse, complete, extend—and celebrate the immortal and the good" ("*Leaves of Grass's Purport*" p. 555) 1891/2.) A recent news article on the real challenge and promise of space,

Therein, perhaps, lies the real promise of space—that in reaching out to the stars mankind will learn to see earth in its true cosmic perspective and achieve a better understanding of itself, and finally create that world of peace and love and happiness that has so long eluded it.

— Newspaper Enterprise Assn. "

jolts like *deja vu* for one familiar with the space imagery in *Leaves of Grass*, especially Whitman's incredible Stanze 46 in "Song of Myself" (pp. 83-84):

This day before dawn I ascended a hill and look'd at the crowded heaven.

And I said to my spirit *When we become the enfolder of those orbs, and the pleasure and knowledge of everything in them, shall we be fill'd and satisfied then?*

And my spirit said *No, we but level that lift to pass and continue beyond.*

Whitman in *Leaves of Grass* sees what is now identifiable reality: the West Coast; Alaska; even democratization of Japan after World War II—?; America in space; a Russian pilot defecting eastward to Japan en route to America and arriving in Los Angeles, California—?; A world where "Nature and Man shall be disjoin'd and diffused no more . . ." ("Passage to India." p. 416; 1871/1881)—?; "Poets to

come! . . .] . . . a new brood, native, . . . greater than before known. . ." ("Poets to Come" in "Inscriptions" p. 14; 1860/1867:—? "In my opinion," discerns Burroughs ahead of his time, "the next age and the next will make more of Whitman, and the next still more, because he is in the great world-current, in the line of the evolutionary movement of our time."²¹

Westering? How far is West? *Leaves of Grass* itself refutes any statement that the West was gone in 1855/1860.²² The West prevails! How pivotal is the American West in Whitman's macro-West? The time has surely arrived to move into Whitman's West, to recognize not only the effect of the frontier on the nation, all there in *Leaves of Grass* before Turner's memorable, often quoted "Significance" address delivered the year following Whitman's death, but the effect of the American West on the West to come. If the American West was the *sine qua non* of Union here, then what it identifies with and represents to others is pivotal in the macro-West Whitman envisions! How many bards besides Ezra Pound, Carl Sandburg, both Cranes, and Robinson Jeffers have really heard him? How many others, non-bards, have heard him? If the very West of which Whitman sings is itself identifiable as the real literature of the American West, a charge lies here those who consider themselves proponents of the cause of the literature of the American West should not take lightly: to ask the extent of the effect of the American West and its literature on America and the world; to read *Leaves of Grass* more closely, teach it more assiduously, assess our own place in influencing not only American letters but the effect the literature of the American West has had, has, and can have upon American and world literature.

NOTES

1. John Burroughs. *Whitman/A Study* (Reprinted from a copy in the collections of the Harvard College Library/From the edition of 1896) New York: AMS Press, Inc. 1969, p. 189.

2. *Ibid.* p. 162

3. For convenience, all pages given parenthetically after each quotation refer to *Leaves of Grass*, Comprehensive Reader's Edition. (Edited by Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley.) New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. 1965, reprinted 1968. Including the title of the poem, the page on which the passage appears in Blodgett and Bradley, and the dates the editors have given for initial and late versions of the poem provides immediate reference for the reader and limits the total number of notes that would be required here.

4. "The following three or four months (Sept. to Dec. '79) I made quite a western journey fetching up at Denver, Colorado, and penetrating the Rocky Mountain region enough to get a good notion of it all." Walt Whitman. *Specimen Days. The Complete*

Writings. Issued under the editorial supervision of his Literary Executors, Richard Maurice Bucke, Thomas B. Harned, and Horace L. Traubel, with additional bibliographical and critical material prepared by Oscar Lovell Triggs, Ph.D., Volume IV. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, The Knickerbocker Press. 1902 p. 252. (See also other passages of the western experience.)

5. Blodgett and Bradley edition of *Leaves of Grass* (or any other copy of "Whitman to Emerson, 1856") p. 736. "In a few years there will be Fifty States."

6. The South Platte River heads near Leadville, Colorado, not more than five or ten miles from where the Arkansas River also has its source, both not more than fifty or sixty miles due south of the head of the Colorado River, on the Continental Divide.

7. Edwin Fussell. *Frontier: American Literature and the American West*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 1965. p. 435.

8. Joan D. Berbrich. *Three Voices from Paumanak*. Port Washington, N.Y.: Ira J. Friedman, Inc. 1969. pp. 111-112. Joseph Whitman, born in England but settling in Stratford, Connecticut in 1640 and in Huntington, Long Island, in 1660 sired Walt's lineage: John Nehemiah, Jesse, Walter, and Walt. Berbrich gives for *Paumanok* "an Indian word meaning 'the island with its breast long drawn out, and laid against the sea.'" p. 192. See also the prototype for the "body electric," p. 178.

9. Edgeley W. Todd. "Indian Pictures and Two Whitman Poems." Reprinted from *The Huntington Library Quarterly*. Volume XIX: number 1: November 1955, pp. 1-11. Discussion of *The Trapper's Bride* by Baltimore artist Alfred Jacob Miller starts on page 2, with reprint of picture from *The West of Alfred Jacob Miller* by Marvin C. Ross, University of Oklahoma Press; on page 5, follow the details of *Osceola*, the reprint from Callin's *The Manners, Customs and Conditions of the North American Indians*. (London, 1841).

10. Burroughs, p. 208.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 161.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

14. Henry Nash Smith. *Virgin Land/The American West as Symbol and Myth*.

Reprinted by Arrangement with Harvard University Press. New York: Vintage Books, 1950. p. 51.

15. Fussell, p. 434.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 438.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 408.

18. Burroughs, p. 224.

19. Fussell, p. 405 ff., p. 416.

20. Newspaper Enterprise Association. "The real challenge and promise of space." Fort Collins *Coloradoan*, Thursday, August 26, 1976, p. 6.

21. Burroughs, pp. 19-20.

22. Fussell, p. 419, p. 438.